

Teacher Effect on the Level of Test Anxiety among Young EFL Learners

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Abstract: Related literature indicates that teachers and tests are strong sources of test anxiety among adult language learners while there exists a serious lack of research on the relationship between teachers and test anxiety in terms of young learners. Thus, this study aims to investigate the teacher effect on the level of test anxiety among young English as foreign language learners as the findings of the previous studies indicate that teachers and tests are strong sources of language anxiety. The sample group of the study consisted of 477 young EFL learners from five primary schools. In order to collect data, a background questionnaire and the TAS were used to assess learners' attitudes towards teachers and their test anxiety levels. The collected data were used to provide a descriptive and correlational analysis to address the research question. The results of the study demonstrate that positive attitudes towards teachers have facilitating effects on test anxiety among children while students experience some physical and affective problems. In the light of the findings of the research, it is recommended that language teachers should use effective communication techniques to ensure moderate levels of test anxiety.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language, Teacher, Test Anxiety, Young Learners

Introduction

Individual differences such as beliefs, attitudes, expectations, motivation levels, and affective states have significant effects on the foreign language learning process (Aydin & Zengin, 2008). Among affective states, test anxiety, an apprehension towards academic evaluation, a fear of failing in tests and an unpleasant experience held either consciously or unconsciously by learners in various situations (Horwitz and Young, 1991), also has considerable effects on learning process whereas language teacher is one of the significant factors in English as a foreign (EFL) teaching and learning. Thus, this paper focuses on the relationship between the levels of test anxiety and the attitudes of young EFL learners.

The results of previous studies indicate that tests and teachers are two strong sources of language anxiety (Bailey, 1983; Ellis & Rathbone, 1987; Young, 1991; Aydin, 2008). However, a major problem that forms a background for this study is that studies have mostly focused on test anxiety among adult EFL learners while research activities are fairly limited when young learners are considered as MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) states that *foreign language anxiety is more relevant to language learning among adults*. In other words, there are a few studies focusing mainly on language anxiety but not specifically on test anxiety among primary school students and teacher – test anxiety relationship (Chan & Wu, 2000; Chan & Wu, 2004). On the other hand, the duration of compulsory primary education was increased to eight years in Turkey by a law put into effect in 1997. Furthermore, foreign language education was made compulsory for students in the fourth and fifth grades in addition to sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students. Another step taken to improve EFL learning in Turkey was the reorganization of the content of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade English courses for the leveling exam (SBS), an official and central examination for the selection and placement of primary school students in high schools administered separately for each grade at the end of the academic year. Despite all these developments, dramatically enough, there is still a serious lack of

research on test anxiety among young learners. So far, only three studies have been conducted on test anxiety in a broader sense, while test anxiety among young EFL learners and the relationship between teacher and the level of test anxiety have not been properly investigated (Koçkar, Kılıç & Şener, 2002; Duman, 2008; Erözkan, 2009). Therefore, there is a growing need for investigating the issues relating to test anxiety among young EFL learners.

In conclusion, this paper aims to investigate the teacher effect on the level of test anxiety among young EFL learners for two reasons: Firstly, it is obvious that test anxiety and teacher effect seem to be significant factors and correlate with each other in EFL learning and teaching. Secondly, studies in Turkey and around the world have mainly focused on test anxiety among adult EFL learners while research activities on young EFL learners seem too limited. Thus, the paper has one research question: Do teachers affect the level of test anxiety among young EFL learners?

Method

The sample group of the study consisted of 477 young EFL learners taking English classes at five primary schools in Balıkesir, Turkey. The mean age of the subjects was 11.8 in the range of 9 and 14. As for their genders, 51.3% were female students, while 48.7% were male. Of all the participants, 100 were fourth-grade, 95 fifth-grade, 89 sixth-grade, 92 seventh-grade, and 101 eighth-grade students. The subjects were randomly selected from five primary schools.

Data collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire, which interrogated the participants about subject variables such as gender, age, school, grade, mean examination scores, parents' monthly income, and their attitudes towards their teachers and English classes, and the Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) developed by Sarason (1978). The TAS consisted of 27 multiple-choice items that aimed to measure the students' levels of test anxiety. Each of the items was assessed on a scale ranging from one to five (never=1, rarely=2, sometimes=3, usually=4, always=5).

The procedure of the study included the translation and correction of the TAS, administration of the instruments, and statistical analysis. First of all, the researcher translated the scale into Turkish and a group of five pre-service teachers of English examined each item to correct possible mistranslations. Subsequently, the scale was administered to a group of ten students in order to correct the misconceptions and to obtain the moderation of the items in the scale. Next, after obtaining a written permission from national education authorities, the background questionnaire and the TAS were administered to the participants in the last week of fall semester in 2009. Subsequently, the collected data were analyzed using the SPSS software. In the analysis, the reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha Model. The reliability coefficient of the scale, which was calculated to be 0.901, indicated a high level of reliability. As for the statistical analysis of the research question, the data were examined for two purposes: First, mean scores and standard deviations of the statements in the TAS were given briefly to see the level of test anxiety. Secondly, t-test and ANOVA were carried out to detect the correlation between the attitudes towards teachers and the level of test anxiety.

Results

In this section, a correlational presentation of the collected data has been provided in order to determine the relationship between the level of test anxiety and attitudes towards teachers. However, before presenting the correlational data, it would be necessary to present the levels of test anxiety among young EFL learners. The mean scores on the TAS items indicate that young EFL learners have a low level of test anxiety. As the findings suggest, having good scores increases the learners' self-confidence for subsequent exams. Moreover, learners usually feel confident and relaxed when they are informed beforehand that they will take a test; they are aware of the fact that the school authorities and teachers should be careful at effects of tense situations on their performance, and they do not suffer anxiety when they have studied sufficiently. Finally, examinations may sometimes cause negative physical effects such as fast heart beating, trembling, and anorexia, and also create some affective problems in some specific situations such as panic and fear. Students may also sometimes believe that other students are brighter during exams, suffer from time pressure and prefer writing papers instead of taking examinations.

The research question investigated the correlation between the level of test anxiety among young EFL learners and their attitudes towards their teachers, the findings about which are presented in Table 1. The values presented indicate that the attitudes of learners towards their teachers significantly correlated with seven of 37 items in the TAS. That is, the students who had positive attitudes towards their English teachers felt more confident and

relaxed and less nervous even if they forgot what they knew. Moreover, the participants who had positive attitudes towards their teachers were less embarrassed during examinations, felt less uneasy before getting their exam papers, and believed more strongly that it was not possible to learn more without examinations. Finally, positive attitudes towards their language teachers reduced diversions during exams. Conclusively, when the abovementioned items are concerned, the findings demonstrate that positive attitudes towards EFL teacher decrease the levels of test anxiety among young EFL learners, while teacher is not a significant factor when the remaining 30 statements in the TAS scales are considered.

Statements in the TAS	I like my English teacher.	N	Mean	F	Sig.
If I knew I would take an English test beforehand, I would feel confident and relaxed.	Never	3	1.67	4.95	.00
	Rarely	4	2.00		
	Sometimes	12	3.67		
	Usually	27	3.44		
	Always	425	3.92		
During examinations, I find myself thinking of irrelevant things.	Never	3	3.33	6.08	.00
	Rarely	4	4.50		
	Sometimes	13	3.62		
	Usually	27	2.56		
	Always	424	2.27		
During an examination, I get so nervous that I forget about the things I know well.	Never	3	3.67	3.33	.01
	Rarely	4	3.25		
	Sometimes	13	3.00		
	Usually	28	2.07		
	Always	431	2.01		
I seem to defeat myself while working on tests.	Never	3	4.67	10.67	.00
	Rarely	4	3.50		
	Sometimes	13	2.54		
	Usually	27	2.07		
	Always	430	1.55		
I wish examinations did not irritate me so much.	Never	3	4.67	6.80	.00
	Rarely	3	2.67		
	Sometimes	13	3.08		
	Usually	28	2.57		
	Always	430	1.98		
If examinations could be done away with, I think I would actually learn more.	Never	3	3.67	7.54	.00
	Rarely	3	4.67		
	Sometimes	13	3.15		
	Usually	28	2.21		
	Always	427	1.80		
I start feeling very uneasy just before handing a test paper back.	Never	3	4.33	2.98	.02
	Rarely	3	3.67		
	Sometimes	13	3.54		
	Usually	28	2.75		
	Always	428	2.49		

Table 1. The relationship between attitudes towards teachers and the level of test anxiety.

Conclusions and Discussion

Three main results were obtained from the study, the first of which is that young EFL learners have a low level of test anxiety. In other words, learners have self-confidence when they have good scores, feel confident and relaxed, are aware of the effects of the role of school authorities and their teachers, and do not suffer from test anxiety when they studied sufficiently. On the other hand, examinations have some moderate negative psychological effects such as fast heart beating, trembling, and anorexia. Secondly, teacher is a significant factor that affects only seven of the 37 items in the TAS. Given the significant correlation between the attitudes towards teachers and the level of test anxiety, as revealed by the seven items in the TAS, it could be underlined that teachers have facilitating effects that decrease the level of test anxiety. That is to say, the results show that most of the students have positive attitudes towards their EFL teachers, and that the students with positive attitudes towards their teachers feel less uneasy, nervous and bothered, and more confident and relaxed. In conclusion, teacher is not a strong source of test anxiety among young EFL learners but a significant factor that decreases the level of test anxiety among their students.

The discussion of results in relation with the findings of previous research can be summarized in two headings. Firstly, tests and teachers are not strong sources of anxiety in contrary to the results previously found by Bailey (1983), Ellis & Rathbone (1987), Young (1991) and Aydin (2008). Controversially, the teacher factor has facilitating effects that reduce the level of test anxiety among young ELF learners. Secondly, it should be noted that language proficiency and language background have considerable effects on test anxiety. That is, as the sample group of this study consisted of young learners with a low level of language proficiency, it is obvious that the conclusions of this study differ from those of previous studies in which adult EFL learners were examined. In this sense, test anxiety is not at a high level among young EFL learners while Rasor & Rasor (1998) and Horwitz (2001) suggest that learners have higher levels of test anxiety due to insufficient language learning.

Given that examinations sometimes cause some negative physical effects in students such as fast heart beating, trembling, and anorexia as well as some affective problems in some specific situations such as panic and fear, some recommendations can be noted for practical purposes. Teachers should be aware of the physical and affective effects of exams on children. In this sense, EFL teachers need to use some effective strategies before, after and during examinations. For instance, they can inform students that anxiety is quite normal (Campbell and Ortiz, 1991; cited in Aydin, 2008) before exams, and promote a low-stress testing environment during examinations. Additionally, they can use some effective communication techniques such as talking and leading discussions with them about their feelings and present practical solutions through group activities or one-to-one dialogues by cooperating with school counselors.

As a final note on the limitations of the research, the subjects of the study were limited to 477 young EFL learners at five primary schools in Balıkesir, Turkey. Furthermore, the scope of the study was confined to the data collected using a background questionnaire and the Test Anxiety Scale developed by Sarason (1978). Further studies should focus on the relationships between the levels of test anxiety and some other factors such as age, gender, economic background, and attitudes towards language course.

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